France at War

Rudyard Kipling

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Kipling was reported missing, believed killed, in his first battle on the Western Front. From this time he was constantly in pain from a gastric ulcer. He published some (censored) articles of war journalism in 1915, collected as *The New Army in Training* and *France at War*.

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France at War
On the Frontier of Civilization
Rudyard Kipling

France [1]
By Rudyard Kipling

Broke to every known mischance, lifted over all
By the light sane joy of life, the buckler of the Gaul,
Furious in luxury, merciless in toil,
Terrible with strength that draws from her tireless soil,

Strictest judge of her own worth, gentlest of men's mind,
First to follow truth and last to leave old truths behind—
France beloved of every soul that loves its fellow–kind.

Ere our birth (rememberest thou?) side by side we lay
Fretting in the womb of Rome to begin the fray.
Ere men knew our tongues apart, our one taste was known—
Each must mould the other's fate as he wrought his own.

To this end we stirred mankind till all earth was ours,
Till our world–end strifes began wayside thrones and powers,
Puppets that we made or broke to bar the other's path—
Necessary, outpost folk, hirelings of our wrath.

To this end we stormed the seas, tack for tack, and burst
Through the doorways of new worlds, doubtful which was first.
Hand on hilt (rememberest thou?), ready for the blow.
Sure whatever else we met we should meet our foe.

Spurred or baulked at ev'ry stride by the other's strength,
So we rode the ages down and every ocean's length;
Where did you refrain from us or we refrain from you?
Ask the wave that has not watched war between us two.

Others held us for a while, but with weaker charms,
These we quitted at the call for each other's arms.
Eager toward the known delight, equally we strove,
Each the other's mystery, terror, need, and love.

To each other's open court with our proofs we came,
Where could we find honour else or men to test the claim?
From each other's throat we wrenched valour's last reward,

That extorted word of praise gasped 'twixt lunge and guard.

In each other's cup we poured mingled blood and tears,
Brutal joys, unmeasured hopes, intolerable fears,
All that soiled or salted life for a thousand years.

Proved beyond the need of proof, matched in every clime,
O companion, we have lived greatly through all time:
Yoked in knowledge and remorse now we come to rest,
Laughing at old villainies that time has turned to jest,

Pardoning old necessity no pardon can efface—
That undying sin we shared in Rouen market–place.
Now we watch the new years shape, wondering if they hold
Fiercer lighting in their hearts than we launched of old.

Now we hear new voices rise, question, boast or gird,
As we raged (rememberest thou?) when our crowds were stirred.
Now we count new keels afloat, and new hosts on land,
Massed liked ours (rememberest thou?) when our strokes were planned.

We were schooled for dear life sake, to know each other's blade:
What can blood and iron make more than we have made?
We have learned by keenest use to know each other's mind:
What shall blood and iron loose that we cannot bind?

We who swept each other's coast, sacked each other's home,
Since the sword of Brennus clashed on the scales at Rome,
Listen, court and close again, wheeling girth to girth,
In the strained and bloodless guard set for peace on earth.

Broke to every known mischance, lifted over all
By the light sane joy of life, the buckler of the Gaul,
Furious in luxury, merciless in toil,
Terrible with strength renewed from a tireless soil,

Strictest judge of her own worth, gentlest of men's mind,
First to follow truth and last to leave old truths behind,
France beloved of every soul that loves or serves its kind.

I
On the Frontier of Civilization

"It's a pretty park," said the French artillery officer. "We've done a lot for it since the owner left. I hope he'll appreciate it when he comes back."

The car traversed a winding drive through woods, between banks embellished with little chalets of a rustic nature. At first, the chalets stood their full height above ground, suggesting tea–gardens in England. Further on they sank into the earth till, at the top of the ascent, only their solid brown roofs showed. Torn branches drooping across the driveway, with here and there a scorched patch of undergrowth, explained the reason of their modesty.

The chateau that commanded these glories of forest and park sat boldly on a terrace. There was nothing wrong with it except, if one looked closely, a few scratches or dints on its white stone walls, or a neatly drilled hole under a flight of steps. One such hole ended in an unexploded shell. "Yes," said the officer. "They arrive here occasionally."

Something bellowed across the folds of the wooded hills; something grunted in reply. Something passed overhead, querulously but not without dignity. Two clear fresh barks joined the chorus, and a man moved lazily in the direction of the guns.

"Well. Suppose we come and look at things a little," said the commanding officer.

AN OBSERVATION POST

There was a specimen tree—a tree worthy of such a park—the sort of tree visitors are always taken to admire. A ladder ran up it to a platform. What little wind there was swayed the tall top, and the ladder creaked like a ship's gangway. A telephone bell tinkled 50 foot overhead. Two invisible guns spoke fervently for half a minute, and broke off like terriers choked on a leash. We climbed till the topmost platform swayed sicklily beneath us. Here one found a rustic shelter, always of the tea–garden pattern, a table, a map, and a little window wreathed with living branches that gave one the first view of the Devil and all his works. It was a stretch of open country, with a few sticks like old tooth–brushes which had once been trees round a farm. The rest was yellow grass, barren to all appearance as the veldt.

"The grass is yellow because they have used gas here," said an officer. "Their trenches are——. You can see for yourself."

The guns in the woods began again. They seemed to have no relation to the regularly spaced bursts of smoke along a little smear in

the desert earth two thousand yards away—no connection at all with the strong voices overhead coming and going. It was as impersonal as the drive of the sea along a breakwater.

Thus it went: a pause—a gathering of sound like the race of an incoming wave; then the high–flung heads of breakers spouting white up the face of a groyne. Suddenly, a seventh wave broke and spread the shape of its foam like a plume overtopping all the others.

"That's one of our torpilleurs—what you call trench–sweepers," said the observer among the whispering leaves.

Some one crossed the platform to consult the map with its ranges. A blistering outbreak of white smokes rose a little beyond the large plume. It was as though the tide had struck a reef out yonder.

Then a new voice of tremendous volume lifted itself out of a lull that followed. Somebody laughed. Evidently the voice was known.

"That is not for us," a gunner said. "They are being waked up from——" he named a distant French position. "So and so is attending to them there. We go on with our usual work. Look! Another torpilleur."

"THE BARBARIAN"

Again a big plume rose; and again the lighter shells broke at their appointed distance beyond it. The smoke died away on that stretch of trench, as the foam of a swell dies in the angle of a harbour wall, and broke out afresh half a mile lower down. In its apparent laziness, in its awful deliberation, and its quick spasms of wrath, it was more like the work of waves than of men; and our high platform's gentle sway and glide was exactly the motion of a ship drifting with us toward that shore.

"The usual work. Only the usual work," the officer explained. "Sometimes it is here. Sometimes above or below us. I have been here since May."

A little sunshine flooded the stricken landscape and made its chemical yellow look more foul. A detachment of men moved out on a road which ran toward the French trenches, and then vanished at the foot of a little rise. Other men appeared moving toward us with that concentration of purpose and bearing shown in both Armies when—dinner is at hand. They looked like people who had been digging hard.

"The same work. Always the same work!" the officer said. "And you could walk from here to the sea or to Switzerland in that ditch—and you'll find the same work going on everywhere. It isn't war."

"It's better than that," said another. "It's the eating–up of a people. They come and they fill the trenches and they die, and they die; and they send more and *those* die. We do the same, of course, but—look!"

He pointed to the large deliberate smoke–heads renewing themselves along that yellowed beach. "That is the frontier of

civilization. They have all civilization against them —those brutes yonder. It's not the local victories of the old wars that we're after. It's the barbarian—all the barbarian. Now, you've seen the whole thing in little. Come and look at our children."

SOLDIERS IN CAVES

We left that tall tree whose fruits are death ripened and distributed at the tingle of small bells. The observer returned to his maps and calculations; the telephone–boy stiffened up beside his exchange as the amateurs went out of his life. Some one called down through the branches to ask who was attending to—Belial, let us say, for I could not catch the gun's name. It seemed to belong to that terrific new voice which had lifted itself for the second or third time. It appeared from the reply that if Belial talked too long he would be dealt with from another point miles away.

The troops we came down to see were at rest in a chain of caves which had begun life as quarries and had been fitted up by the army for its own uses. There were underground corridors, ante–chambers, rotundas, and ventilating shafts with a bewildering play of cross lights, so that wherever you looked you saw Goya's pictures of men–at–arms.

Every soldier has some of the old maid in him, and rejoices in all the gadgets and devices of his own invention. Death and wounding come by nature, but to lie dry, sleep soft, and keep yourself clean by forethought and contrivance is art, and in all things the Frenchman is gloriously an artist.

Moreover, the French officers seem as mother–keen on their men as their men are brother–fond of them. Maybe the possessive form of address: "Mon general," "mon capitaine," helps the idea, which our men cloke in other and curter phrases. And those soldiers, like ours, had been welded for months in one furnace. As an officer said: "Half our orders now need not be given. Experience makes us think together." I believe, too, that if a French private has an idea—and they are full of ideas—it reaches his C. 0. quicker than it does with us.

THE SENTINEL HOUNDS

The overwhelming impression was the brilliant health and vitality of these men and the quality of their breeding. They bore themselves with swing and rampant delight in life, while their voices as they talked in the side–caverns among the stands of arms were the controlled voices of civilization. Yet, as the lights pierced the gloom they looked like bandits dividing the spoil. One picture, though far from war, stays with me. A perfectly built, dark–skinned young giant had peeled himself out of his blue coat and had brought it down with a swish upon the shoulder of a half–stripped comrade who was kneeling at his feet with some footgear. They stood against a

background of semi–luminous blue haze, through which glimmered a pile of coppery straw half covered by a red blanket. By divine accident of light and pose it St. Martin giving his cloak to the beggar. There were scores of pictures in these galleries—notably a rock–hewn chapel where the red of the cross on the rough canvas altar–cloth glowed like a ruby. Further inside the caves we found a row of little rock–cut kennels, each inhabited by one wise, silent dog. Their duties begin in at night with the sentinels and listening–posts. "And believe me," a proud instructor, "my fellow here knows the difference between the noise of our shells and the Boche shells."

When we came out into the open again there were good opportunities for this study. Voices and wings met and passed in the air, and, perhaps, one strong young tree had not been bending quite so far across the picturesque park–drive when we first went that way.

"Oh, yes," said an officer, "shells have to fall somewhere, and," he added with fine toleration, "it is, after all, against us that the Boche directs them. But come you and look at my dug–out. It's the most superior of all possible dug–outs."

"No. Come and look at our mess. It's the Ritz of these parts." And they joyously told how they had got, or procured, the various fittings and elegancies, while hands stretched out of the gloom to shake, and men nodded welcome and greeting all through that cheery brotherhood in the woods.

WORK IN THE FIELDS

The voices and the wings were still busy after lunch, when the car slipped past the tea–houses in the drive, and came into a country where women and children worked among the crops. There were large raw shell holes by the wayside or in the midst of fields, and often a cottage or a villa had been smashed as a bonnet–box is smashed by an umbrella. That must be part of Belial's work when he bellows so truculently among the hills to the north.

We were looking for a town that lives under shell–fire. The regular road to it was reported unhealthy—not that the women and children seemed to care. We took byways of which certain exposed heights and corners were lightly blinded by wind–brakes of dried tree–tops. Here the shell holes were rather thick on the ground. But the women and the children and the old men went on with their work with the cattle and the crops; and where a house had been broken by shells the rubbish was collected in a neat pile, and where a room or two still remained usable, it was inhabited, and the tattered window–curtains fluttered as proudly as any flag. And time was when I used to denounce young France because it tried to kill itself beneath my car wheels; and the fat old women who crossed roads without warning; and the specially deaf old men who slept in carts on the wrong side of

the road! Now, I could take off my hat to every single soul of them, but that one cannot traverse a whole land bareheaded. The nearer we came to our town the fewer were the people, till at last we halted in a well–built suburb of paved streets where there was no life at all….

A WRECKED TOWN

The stillness was as terrible as the spread of the quick busy weeds between the paving–stones; the air smelt of pounded mortar and crushed stone; the sound of a footfall echoed like the drop of a pebble in a well. At first the horror of wrecked apartment–houses and big shops laid open makes one waste energy in anger. It is not seemly that rooms should be torn out of the sides of buildings as one tears the soft heart out of English bread; that villa roofs should lie across iron gates of private garages, or that drawing–room doors should flap alone and disconnected between two emptinesses of twisted girders. The eye wearies of the repeated pattern that burst shells make on stone walls, as the mouth sickens of the taste of mortar and charred timber. One quarter of the place had been shelled nearly level; the facades of the houses stood doorless, roofless, and windowless like stage scenery. This was near the cathedral, which is always a favourite mark for the heathen. They had gashed and ripped the sides of the cathedral itself, so that the birds flew in and out at will; they had smashed holes in the roof; knocked huge cantles out of the buttresses, and pitted and starred the paved square outside. They were at work, too, that very afternoon, though I do not think the cathedral was their objective for the moment. We walked to and fro in the silence of the streets and beneath the whirring wings overhead. Presently, a young woman, keeping to the wall, crossed a corner. An old woman opened a shutter (how it jarred!), and spoke to her. The silence closed again, but it seemed to me that I heard a sound of singing—the sort of chant one hears in nightmare–cities of voices crying from underground.

IN THE CATHEDRAL

"Nonsense," said an officer. "Who should be singing here?" We circled the cathedral again, and saw what pavement–stones can do against their own city, when the shell jerks them upward. But there *was* singing after all—on the other side of a little door in the flank of the cathedral. We looked in, doubting, and saw at least a hundred folk, mostly women, who knelt before the altar of an unwrecked chapel. We withdrew quietly from that holy ground, and it was not only the eyes of the French officers that filled with tears. Then there came an old, old thing with a prayer–book in her hand, pattering across the square, evidently late for service.

"And who are those women?" I asked.

"Some are caretakers; people who have still little shops here. (There is one quarter where you can buy things.) There are many old

people, too, who will not go away. They are of the place, you see."

"And this bombardment happens often?" I said.

"It happens always. Would you like to look at the railway station? Of course, it has not been so bombarded as the cathedral."

We went through the gross nakedness of streets without people, till we reached the railway station, which was very fairly knocked about, but, as my friends said, nothing like as much as the cathedral. Then we had to cross the end of a long street down which the Boche could see clearly. As one glanced up it, one perceived how the weeds, to whom men's war is the truce of God, had come back and were well established the whole length of it, watched by the long perspective of open, empty windows.

II
The Nation's Spirit and a New Inheritance

We left that stricken but undefeated town, dodged a few miles down the roads beside which the women tended their cows, and dropped into a place on a hill where a Moroccan regiment of many experiences was in billets.

They were Mohammedans bafflingly like half a dozen of our Indian frontier types, though they spoke no accessible tongue. They had, of course, turned the farm buildings where they lay into a little bit of Africa in colour and smell. They had been gassed in the north; shot over and shot down, and set up to be shelled again; and their officers talked of North African wars that we had never heard of—sultry days against long odds in the desert years ago. "Afterward—is it not so with you also?—we get our best recruits from the tribes we have fought. These men are children. They make no trouble. They only want to go where cartridges are burnt. They are of the few races to whom fighting is a pleasure."

"And how long have you dealt with them?"

"A long time—a long time. I helped to organize the corps. I am one of those whose heart is in Africa." He spoke slowly, almost feeling for his French words, and gave some order. I shall not forget his eyes as he turned to a huge, brown, Afreedee–like Mussulman hunkering down beside his accoutrements. He had two sides to his head, that bearded, burned, slow–spoken officer, met and parted with in an hour.

The day closed—(after an amazing interlude in the chateau of a dream, which was all glassy ponds, stately trees, and vistas of white and gold saloons. The proprietor was somebody's chauffeur at the front, and we drank to his excellent health) —at a little village in a twilight full of the petrol of many cars and the wholesome flavour of healthy troops. There is no better guide to camp than one's own thoughtful nose; and though I poked mine everywhere, in no place then or later did it strike that vile betraying taint of underfed, unclean men. And the same with the horses.

THE LINE THAT NEVER SLEEPS

It is difficult to keep an edge after hours of fresh air and experiences; so one does not get the most from the most interesting part of the day—the dinner with the local headquarters. Here the professionals meet—the Line, the Gunners, the Intelligence with stupefying photo–plans of the enemy's trenches; the Supply; the Staff,

who collect and note all things, and are very properly chaffed; and, be sure, the Interpreter, who, by force of questioning prisoners, naturally develops into a Sadducee. It is their little asides to each other, the slang, and the half–words which, if one understood, instead of blinking drowsily at one's plate, would give the day's history in little. But tire and the difficulties of a sister (not a foreign) tongue cloud everything, and one goes to billets amid a murmur of voices, the rush of single cars through the night, the passage of battalions, and behind it all, the echo of the deep voices calling one to the other, along the line that never sleeps.

. . . . . .

The ridge with the scattered pines might have hidden children at play. Certainly a horse would have been quite visible, but there was no hint of guns, except a semaphore which announced it was forbidden to pass that way, as the battery was firing. The Boches must have looked for that battery, too. The ground was pitted with shell holes of all calibres—some of them as fresh as mole–casts in the misty damp morning; others where the poppies had grown from seed to flower all through the summer.

"And where are the guns?" I demanded at last.

They were almost under one's hand, their ammunition in cellars and dug–outs beside them. As far as one can make out, the 75 gun has no pet name. The bayonet is Rosalie the virgin of Bayonne, but the 75, the watchful nurse of the trenches and little sister of the Line, seems to be always "soixante– quinze." Even those who love her best do not insist that she is beautiful. Her merits are French—logic, directness, simplicity, and the supreme gift of "occasionality." She is equal to everything on the spur of the moment. One sees and studies the few appliances which make her do what she does, and one feels that any one could have invented her.

FAMOUS FRENCH 75's

"As a matter of fact," says a commandant, "anybody—or, rather, everybody did. The general idea is after such–and–such system, the patent of which had expired, and we improved it; the breech action, with slight modification, is somebody else's; the sighting is perhaps a little special; and so is the traversing, but, at bottom, it is only an assembly of variations and arrangements."

That, of course, is all that Shakespeare ever got out of the alphabet. The French Artillery make their own guns as he made his plays. It is just as simple as that.

"There is nothing going on for the moment; it's too misty," said

the Commandant. (I fancy that the Boche, being, as a rule methodical, amateurs are introduced to batteries in the Boche's intervals. At least, there are hours healthy and unhealthy which vary with each position.) "But," the Commandant reflected a moment, "there is a place—and a distance. Let us say . . . " He gave a range.

The gun–servers stood back with the bored contempt of the professional for the layman who intrudes on his mysteries. Other civilians had come that way before—had seen, and grinned, and complimented and gone their way, leaving the gunners high up on the bleak hillside to grill or mildew or freeze for weeks and months. Then she spoke. Her voice was higher pitched, it seemed, than ours—with a more shrewish tang to the speeding shell. Her recoil was as swift and as graceful as the shrug of a French–woman's shoulders; the empty case leaped forth and clanged against the trail; the tops of two or three pines fifty yards away nodded knowingly to each other, though there was no wind.

"They'll be bothered down below to know the meaning of our single shot. We don't give them one dose at a time as a rule," somebody laughed.

We waited in the fragrant silence. Nothing came back from the mist that clogged the lower grounds, though no shell of this war was ever launched with more earnest prayers that it might do hurt.

Then they talked about the lives of guns; what number of rounds some will stand and others will not; how soon one can make two good guns out of three spoilt ones, and what crazy luck sometimes goes with a single shot or a blind salvo.

LESSON FROM THE "BOCHE"

A shell must fall somewhere, and by the law of averages occasionally lights straight as a homing pigeon on the one spot where it can wreck most. Then earth opens for yards around, and men must be dug out,—some merely breathless, who shake their ears, swear, and carry on, and others whose souls have gone loose among terrors. These have to be dealt with as their psychology demands, and the French officer is a good psychologist. One of them said: "Our national psychology has changed. I do not recognize it myself."

"What made the change?"

"The Boche. If he had been quiet for another twenty years the world must have been his—rotten, but all his. Now he is saving the world."

"How?"

"Because he has shown us what Evil is. We—you and I, England and the rest—had begun to doubt the existence of Evil. The Boche is saving us."

Then we had another look at the animal in its trench—a little

nearer this time than before, and quieter on account of the mist. Pick up the chain anywhere you please, you shall find the same observation–post, table, map, observer, and telephonist; the same always–hidden, always–ready guns; and same vexed foreshore of trenches, smoking and shaking from Switzerland to the sea. The handling of the war varies with the nature of the country, but the tools are unaltered. One looks upon them at last with the same weariness of wonder as the eye receives from endless repetitions of Egyptian hieroglyphics. A long, low profile, with a lump to one side, means the field–gun and its attendant ammunition–case; a circle and slot stand for an observation–post; the trench is a bent line, studded with vertical plumes of explosion; the great guns of position, coming and going on their motors, repeat themselves as scarabs; and man himself is a small blue smudge, no larger than a foresight, crawling and creeping or watching and running among all these terrific symbols.

TRAGEDY OF RHEIMS

But there is no hieroglyphic for Rheims, no blunting of the mind at the abominations committed on the cathedral there. The thing peers upward, maimed and blinded, from out of the utter wreckage of the Archbishop's palace on the one side and dust–heaps of crumbled houses on the other. They shelled, as they still shell it, with high explosives and with incendiary shells, so that the statues and the stonework in places are burned the colour of raw flesh. The gargoyles are smashed; statues, crockets, and spires tumbled; walls split and torn; windows thrust out and tracery obliterated. Wherever one looks at the tortured pile there is mutilation and defilement, and yet it had never more of a soul than it has to–day.

Inside—("Cover yourselves, gentlemen," said the sacristan, "this place is no longer consecrated")—everything is swept clear or burned out from end to end, except two candlesticks in front of the niche where Joan of Arc's image used to stand. There is a French flag there now. [And the last time I saw Rheims Cathedral was in a spring twilight, when the great west window glowed, and the only lights within were those of candles which some penitent English had lit in Joan's honour on those same candlesticks.] The high altar was covered with floor–carpets; the pavement tiles were cracked and jarred out by the rubbish that had fallen from above, the floor was gritty with dust of glass and powdered stone, little twists of leading from the windows, and iron fragments. Two great doors had been blown inwards by the blast of a shell in the Archbishop's garden, till they had bent grotesquely to the curve of a cask. There they had jammed. The windows—but the record has been made, and will be kept by better hands than mine. It will last through the generation in which the

Teuton is cut off from the fellowship of mankind—all the long, still years when this war of the body is at an end, and the real war begins. Rheims is but one of the altars which the heathen have put up to commemorate their own death throughout all the world. It will serve. There is a mark, well known by now, which they have left for a visible seal of their doom. When they first set the place alight some hundreds of their wounded were being tended in the Cathedral. The French saved as many as they could, but some had to be left. Among them was a major, who lay with his back against a pillar. It has been ordained that the signs of his torments should remain—an outline of both legs and half a body, printed in greasy black upon the stones. There are very many people who hope and pray that the sign will be respected at least by our children's children.

IRON NERVE AND FAITH

And, in the meantime, Rheims goes about what business it may have with that iron nerve and endurance and faith which is the new inheritance of France. There is agony enough when the big shells come in; there is pain and terror among the people; and always fresh desecration to watch and suffer. The old men and the women and the children drink of that cup daily, and yet the bitterness does not enter into their souls. Mere words of admiration are impertinent, but the exquisite quality of the French soul has been the marvel to me throughout. They say themselves, when they talk: "We did not know what our nation was. Frankly, we did not expect it ourselves. But the thing came, and—you see, we go on."

Or as a woman put it more logically, "What else can we do? Remember, *we* knew the Boche in '70 when *you* did not. We know what he has done in the last year. This is not war. It is against wild beasts that we fight. There is no arrangement possible with wild beasts." This is the one vital point which we in England *must* realize. We are dealing with animals who have scientifically and philosophically removed themselves inconceivably outside civilization. When you have heard a few—only a few—tales of their doings, you begin to understand a little. When you have seen Rheims, you understand a little more. When you have looked long enough at the faces of the women, you are inclined to think that the women will have a large say in the final judgment. They have earned it a thousand times.

III
Battle Spectacle and a Review

Travelling with two chauffeurs is not the luxury it looks; since there is only one of you and there is always another of those iron men to relieve the wheel. Nor can I decide whether an ex–professor of the German tongue, or an ex–roadracer who has lived six years abroad, or a Marechal des Logis, or a Brigadier makes the most thrusting driver through three–mile stretches of military traffic repeated at half–hour intervals. Sometimes it was motor–ambulances strung all along a level; or supply; or those eternal big guns coming round corners with trees chained on their long backs to puzzle aeroplanes, and their leafy, big–shell limbers snorting behind them. In the rare breathing–spaces men with rollers and road metal attacked the road. In peace the roads of France, thanks to the motor, were none too good. In war they stand the incessant traffic far better than they did with the tourist. My impression —after some seven hundred miles printed off on me at between 60 and 70 kilometres—was of uniform excellence. Nor did I come upon any smashes or breakdowns in that distance, and they were certainly trying them hard. Nor, which is the greater marvel, did *we* kill anybody; though we did miracles down the streets to avoid babes, kittens, and chickens. The land is used to every detail of war, and to its grime and horror and make–shifts, but also to war's unbounded courtesy, kindness, and long–suffering, and the gaiety that comes, thank God, to balance overwhelming material loss.

FARM LIFE AMIDST WAR

There was a village that had been stamped flat, till it looked older than Pompeii. There were not three roofs left, nor one whole house. In most places you saw straight into the cellars. The hops were ripe in the grave–dotted fields round about. They had been brought in and piled in the nearest outline of a dwelling. Women sat on chairs on the pavement, picking the good–smelling bundles. When they had finished one, they reached back and pulled out another through the window–hole behind them, talking and laughing the while. A cart had to be maneuvered out of what had been a farmyard, to take the hops to market. A thick, broad, fair–haired wench, of the sort that Millet drew, flung all her weight on a spoke and brought the cart forward into the street. Then she shook herself, and, hands on hips, danced a little defiant jig in her sabots as she went back to get the horse. Another girl came across a bridge. She was precisely of the opposite type, slender, creamy–skinned, and delicate–featured. She carried a brand–new broom over her shoulder through that desolation, and bore

herself with the pride and grace of Queen Iseult.

The farm–girl came out leading the horse, and as the two young things passed they nodded and smiled at each other, with the delicate tangle of the hop–vines at their feet.

The guns spoke earnestly in the north. That was the Argonne, where the Crown Prince was busily getting rid of a few thousands of his father's faithful subjects in order to secure himself the reversion of his father's throne. No man likes losing his job, and when at long last the inner history of this war comes to be written, we may find that the people we mistook for principals and prime agents were only average incompetents moving all Hell to avoid dismissal. (For it is absolutely true that when a man sells his soul to the devil he does it for the price of half nothing.)

WATCHING THE GUN–FIRE

It must have been a hot fight. A village, wrecked as is usual along this line, opened on it from a hillside that overlooked an Italian landscape of carefully drawn hills studded with small villages—a plain with a road and a river in the foreground, and an all–revealing afternoon light upon everything. The hills smoked and shook and bellowed. An observation–balloon climbed up to see; while an aeroplane which had nothing to do with the strife, but was merely training a beginner, ducked and swooped on the edge of the plain. Two rose–pink pillars of crumbled masonry, guarding some carefully trimmed evergreens on a lawn half buried in rubbish, represented an hotel where the Crown Prince had once stayed. All up the hillside to our right the foundations of houses lay out, like a bit of tripe, with the sunshine in their square hollows. Suddenly a band began to play up the hill among some trees; and an officer of local Guards in the new steel anti–shrapnel helmet, which is like the seventeenth century sallet, suggested that we should climb and get a better view. He was a kindly man, and in speaking English had discovered (as I do when speaking French) that it is simpler to stick to one gender. His choice was the feminine, and the Boche described as "she" throughout made me think better of myself, which is the essence of friendship. We climbed a flight of old stone steps, for generations the playground of little children, and found a ruined church, and a battalion in billets, recreating themselves with excellent music and a little horseplay on the outer edge of the crowd. The trouble in the hills was none of their business for that day.

Still higher up, on a narrow path among the trees, stood a priest and three or four officers. They watched the battle and claimed the great bursts of smoke for one side or the other, at the same time as they kept an eye on the flickering aeroplane. "Ours," they said, half under their breath. "Theirs." "No, not ours that one—theirs! . . . That

fool is banking too steep . . . That's Boche shrapnel. They always burst it high. That's our big gun behind that outer hill . . . He'll drop his machine in the street if he doesn't take care . . . There goes a trench–sweeper. Those last two were theirs, but *that*"—it was a full roar —"was ours."

BEHIND THE GERMAN LINES

The valley held and increased the sounds till they seemed to hit our hillside like a sea.

A change of light showed a village, exquisitely pencilled atop of a hill, with reddish haze at its feet.

"What is that place?" I asked.

The priest replied in a voice as deep as an organ: "That is Saint—— It is in the Boche lines. Its condition is pitiable."

The thunders and the smokes rolled up and diminished and renewed themselves, but the small children romped up and down the old stone steps; the beginner's aeroplane unsteadily chased its own shadow over the fields; and the soldiers in billet asked the band for their favourite tunes.

Said the lieutenant of local Guards as the cars went on: "She—play—Tipperary."

And she did—to an accompaniment of heavy pieces in the hills, which followed us into a town all ringed with enormous searchlights, French and Boche together, scowling at each other beneath the stars.

. . . .

It happened about that time that Lord Kitchener with General Joffre reviewed a French Army Corps.

We came on it in a vast dip of ground under grey clouds, as one comes suddenly on water; for it lay out in misty blue lakes of men mixed with darker patches, like osiers and undergrowth, of guns, horses, and wagons. A straight road cut the landscape in two along its murmuring front.

VETERANS OF THE WAR

It was as though Cadmus had sown the dragon's teeth, not in orderly furrows but broadcast, till, horrified by what arose, he had emptied out the whole bag and fled. But these were no new warriors. The record of their mere pitched battles would have satiated a Napoleon. Their regiments and batteries had learnt to achieve the impossible as a matter of routine, and in twelve months they had scarcely for a week lost direct contact with death. We went down the line and looked into the eyes of those men with the used bayonets and rifles; the packs that could almost stow themselves on the shoulders

that would be strange without them; at the splashed guns on their repaired wheels, and the easy–working limbers. One could feel the strength and power of the mass as one feels the flush of heat from off a sunbaked wall. When the Generals' cars arrived there, there was no loud word or galloping about. The lakes of men gathered into straight–edged battalions; the batteries aligned a little; a squadron reined back or spurred up; but it was all as swiftly smooth as the certainty with which a man used to the pistol draws and levels it at the required moment. A few peasant women saw the Generals alight. The aeroplanes, which had been skimming low as swallows along the front of the line (theirs must have been a superb view) ascended leisurely, and "waited on" like hawks. Then followed the inspection, and one saw the two figures, tall and short, growing smaller side by side along the white road, till far off among the cavalry they entered their cars again, and moved along the horizon to another rise of grey–green plain.

"The army will move across where you are standing. Get to a flank," some one said.

AN ARMY IN MOTION

We were no more than well clear of that immobile host when it all surged forward, headed by massed bands playing a tune that sounded like the very pulse of France.

The two Generals, with their Staff, and the French Minister for War, were on foot near a patch of very green lucerne. They made about twenty figures in all. The cars were little grey blocks against the grey skyline. There was nothing else in all that great plain except the army; no sound but the changing notes of the aeroplanes and the blunted impression, rather than noise, of feet of men on soft ground. They came over a slight ridge, so that one saw the curve of it first furred, then grassed, with the tips of bayonets, which immediately grew to full height, and then, beneath them, poured the wonderful infantry. The speed, the thrust, the drive of that broad blue mass was like a tide–race up an arm of the sea; and how such speed could go with such weight, and how such weight could be in itself so absolutely under control, filled one with terror. All the while, the band, on a far headland, was telling them and telling them (as if they did not know!) of the passion and gaiety and high heart of their own land in the speech that only they could fully understand. (To hear the music of a country is like hearing a woman think aloud.)

"What *is* the tune?" I asked of an officer beside me.

"My faith, I can't recall for the moment. I've marched to it often enough, though. 'Sambre–et–Meuse,' perhaps. Look! There goes my battalion! Those Chasseurs yonder."

He knew, of course; but what could a stranger identify in that

earth–shaking passage of thirty thousand?

ARTILLERY AND CAVALRY

The note behind the ridge changed to something deeper.

"Ah! Our guns," said an artillery officer, and smiled tolerantly on the last blue waves of the Line already beating toward the horizon.

They came twelve abreast—one hundred and fifty guns free for the moment to take the air in company, behind their teams. And next week would see them, hidden singly or in lurking confederacies, by mountain and marsh and forest, or the wrecked habitations of men—where?

The big guns followed them, with that long–nosed air of detachment peculiar to the breed. The Gunner at my side made no comment. He was content to let his Arm speak for itself, but when one big gun in a sticky place fell out of alignment for an instant I saw his eyebrows contract. The artillery passed on with the same inhuman speed and silence as the Line; and the Cavalry's shattering trumpets closed it all.

They are like our Cavalry in that their horses are in high condition, and they talk hopefully of getting past the barbed wire one of these days and coming into their own. Meantime, they are employed on "various work as requisite," and they all sympathize with our rough–rider of Dragoons who flatly refused to take off his spurs in the trenches. If he had to die as a damned infantryman, he wasn't going to be buried as such. A troop–horse of a flanking squadron decided that he had had enough of war, and jibbed like Lot's wife. His rider (we all watched him) ranged about till he found a stick, which he used, but without effect. Then he got off and led the horse, which was evidently what the brute wanted, for when the man remounted the jibbing began again. The last we saw of him was one immensely lonely figure leading one bad but happy horse across an absolutely empty world. Think of his reception—the sole man of 40,000 who had fallen out!

THE BOCHE AS MR. SMITH

The Commander of that Army Corps came up to salute. The cars went away with the Generals and the Minister for War; the Army passed out of sight over the ridges to the north; the peasant women stooped again to their work in the fields, and wet mist shut down on all the plain; but one tingled with the electricity that had passed. Now one knows what the solidarity of civilization means. Later on the civilized nations will know more, and will wonder and laugh together at their old blindness. When Lord Kitchener went down the line, before the march past, they say that he stopped to speak to a General who had been Marchand's Chief of Staff at the time of Fashoda. And Fashoda was one of several cases when civilization was very nearly

maneuvered into fighting with itself "for the King of Prussia," as the saying goes. The all–embracing vileness of the Boche is best realized from French soil, where they have had large experience of it. "And yet," as some one observed, "we ought to have known that a race who have brought anonymous letter–writing to its highest pitch in their own dirty Court affairs would certainly use the same methods in their foreign politics. *Why* didn't we realize?"

"For the same reason," another responded, "that society did not realize that the late Mr. Smith, of your England, who married three wives, bought baths in advance for each of them, and, when they had left him all their money, drowned them one by one."

"And were the baths by any chance called Denmark, Austria, and France in 1870?" a third asked.

"No, they were respectable British tubs. But until Mr. Smith had drowned his third wife people didn't get suspicious. They argued that 'men don't do such things.' That sentiment is the criminal's best protection."

IV
The Spirit of the People

We passed into the zone of another army and a hillier country, where the border villages lay more sheltered. Here and there a town and the fields round it gave us a glimpse of the furious industry with which France makes and handles material and troops. With her, as with us, the wounded officer of experience goes back to the drill–ground to train the new levies. But it was always the little crowded, defiant villages, and the civil population waiting unweariedly and cheerfully on the unwearied, cheerful army, that went closest to the heart. Take these pictures, caught almost anywhere during a journey: A knot of little children in difficulties with the village water–tap or high–handled pump. A soldier, bearded and fatherly, or young and slim and therefore rather shy of the big girls' chaff, comes forward and lifts the pail or swings the handle. His reward, from the smallest babe swung high in air, or, if he is an older man, pressed against his knees, is a kiss. Then nobody laughs.

Or a fat old lady making oration against some wicked young soldiers who, she says, know what has happened to a certain bottle of wine. "And I meant it for all—yes, for all of you —this evening, instead of the thieves who stole it. Yes, I tell you—stole it!" The whole street hears her; so does the officer, who pretends not to, and the amused half–battalion up the road. The young men express penitence; she growls like a thunderstorm, but, softening at last, cuffs and drives them affectionately before her. They are all one family.

Or a girl at work with horses in a ploughed field that is dotted with graves. The machine must avoid each sacred plot. So, hands on the plough–stilts, her hair flying forward, she shouts and wrenches till her little brother runs up and swings the team out of the furrow. Every aspect and detail of life in France seems overlaid with a smooth patina of long–continued war—everything except the spirit of the people, and that is as fresh and glorious as the sight of their own land in sunshine.

A CITY AND WOMAN

We found a city among hills which knew itself to be a prize greatly coveted by the Kaiser. For, truly, it was a pleasant, a desirable, and an insolent city. Its streets were full of life; it boasted an establishment almost as big as Harrod's and full of buyers, and its women dressed and shod themselves with care and grace, as befits ladies who, at any time, may be ripped into rags by bombs from aeroplanes. And there was another city whose population seemed to

be all soldiers in training; and yet another given up to big guns and ammunition —an extraordinary sight.

After that, we came to a little town of pale stone which an Army had made its headquarters. It looked like a plain woman who had fainted in public. It had rejoiced in many public institutions that were turned into hospitals and offices; the wounded limped its wide, dusty streets, detachments of Infantry went through it swiftly; and utterly bored motor–lorries cruised up and down roaring, I suppose, for something to look at or to talk to. In the centre of it I found one Janny, or rather his marble bust, brooding over a minute iron–railed garden of half–dried asters opposite a shut–up school, which it appeared from the inscription Janny had founded somewhere in the arid Thirties. It was precisely the sort of school that Janny, by the look of him, would have invented. Not even French adaptability could make anything of it. So Janny had his school, with a faint perfume of varnish, all to himself in a hot stillness of used–up air and little whirls of dust. And because that town seemed so barren, I met there a French General whom I would have gone very far to have encountered. He, like the others, had created and tempered an army for certain work in a certain place, and its hand had been heavy on the Boche. We talked of what the French woman was, and had done, and was doing, and extolled her for her goodness and her faith and her splendid courage. When we parted, I went back and made my profoundest apologies to Janny, who must have had a mother. The pale, overwhelmed town did not now any longer resemble a woman who had fainted, but one who must endure in public all manner of private woe and still, with hands that never cease working, keeps her soul and is cleanly strong for herself and for her men.

FRENCH OFFICERS

The guns began to speak again among the hills that we dived into; the air grew chillier as we climbed; forest and wet rocks closed round us in the mist, to the sound of waters trickling alongside; there was a tang of wet fern, cut pine, and the first breath of autumn when the road entered a tunnel and a new world—Alsace.

Said the Governor of those parts thoughtfully: "The main thing was to get those factory chimneys smoking again." (They were doing so in little flats and villages all along.) "You won't see any girls, because they're at work in the textile factories. Yes, it isn't a bad country for summer hotels, but I'm afraid it won't do for winter sports. We've only a metre of snow, and it doesn't lie, except when you are hauling guns up mountains. Then, of course, it drifts and freezes like Davos. That's our new railway below there. Pity it's too misty to see the view."

But for his medals, there was nothing in the Governor to show

that he was not English. He might have come straight from an Indian frontier command.

One notices this approximation of type in the higher ranks, and many of the juniors are cut out of the very same cloth as ours. They get whatever fun may be going: their performances are as incredible and outrageous as the language in which they describe them afterward is bald, but convincing, and—I overheard the tail–end of a yarn told by a child of twenty to some other babes. It was veiled in the obscurity of the French tongue, and the points were lost in shouts of laughter —but I imagine the subaltern among his equals displays just as much reverence for his elders and betters as our own boys do. The epilogue, at least, was as old as both Armies:

"And what did he say then?"

"Oh, the usual thing. He held his breath till I thought he'd burst. Then he damned me in heaps, and I took good care to keep out of his sight till next day."

But officially and in the high social atmosphere of Headquarters their manners and their meekness are of the most admirable. There they attend devoutly on the wisdom of their seniors, who treat them, so it seemed, with affectionate confidence.

FRONT THAT NEVER SLEEPS

When the day's reports are in, all along the front, there is a man, expert in the meaning of things, who boils them down for that cold official digest which tells us that "There was the usual grenade fighting at——. We made appreciable advance at——," etc. The original material comes in sheaves and sheaves, where individual character and temperament have full and amusing play. It is reduced for domestic consumption like an overwhelming electric current. Otherwise we could not take it in. But at closer range one realizes that the Front never sleeps; never ceases from trying new ideas and weapons which, so soon as the Boche thinks he has mastered them, are discarded for newer annoyances and bewilderments.

"The Boche is above all things observant and imitative," said one who counted quite a few Boches dead on the front of his sector. "When you present him with a new idea, he thinks it over for a day or two. Then he presents his riposte."

"Yes, my General. That was exactly what he did to me when I — did so and so. He was quite silent for a day. Then—he stole my patent."

"And you?"

"I had a notion that he'd do that, so I had changed the specification."

Thus spoke the Staff, and so it is among the junior commands, down to the semi–isolated posts where boy–Napoleons live on their

own, through unbelievable adventures. They are inventive young devils, these veterans of 21, possessed of the single ideal—to kill—which they follow with men as single–minded as themselves. Battlefield tactics do not exist; when a whole nation goes to ground there can be none of the "victories" of the old bookish days. But there is always the killing—the well–schemed smashing of a full trench, the rushing out and the mowing down of its occupants; the unsuspicious battalion far in the rear, located after two nights' extreme risk alone among rubbish of masonry, and wiped out as it eats or washes itself; and, more rarely, the body to body encounter with animals removed from the protection of their machinery, when the bayonets get their chance. The Boche does not at all like meeting men whose womenfolk he has dishonoured or mutilated, or used as a protection against bullets. It is not that these men are angry or violent. They do not waste time in that way. They kill him.

THE BUSINESS OF WAR

The French are less reticent than we about atrocities committed by the Boche, because those atrocities form part of their lives. They are not tucked away in reports of Commissions, and vaguely referred to as "too awful." Later on, perhaps, we shall be unreserved in our turn. But they do not talk of them with any babbling heat or bleat or make funny little appeals to a "public opinion" that, like the Boche, has gone underground. It occurs to me that this must be because every Frenchman has his place and his chance, direct or indirect, to diminish the number of Boches still alive. Whether he lies out in a sandwich of damp earth, or sweats the big guns up the crests behind the trees, or brings the fat, loaded barges into the very heart of the city, where the shell–wagons wait, or spends his last crippled years at the harvest, he is doing his work to that end.

If he is a civilian he may—as he does—say things about his Government, which, after all, is very like other popular governments. (A lifetime spent in watching how the cat jumps does not make lion–tamers.) But there is very little human rubbish knocking about France to hinder work or darken counsel. Above all, there is a thing called the Honour of Civilization, to which France is attached. The meanest man feels that he, in his place, is permitted to help uphold it, and, I think, bears himself, therefore, with new dignity.

A CONTRAST IN TYPES

This is written in a garden of smooth turf, under a copper beech, beside a glassy mill–stream, where soldiers of Alpine regiments are writing letters home, while the guns shout up and down the narrow valleys.

A great wolf–hound, who considers himself in charge of the old–fashioned farmhouse, cannot understand why his master, aged six,

should be sitting on the knees of the Marechal des Logis, the iron man who drives the big car.

"But you *are* French, little one?" says the giant, with a yearning arm round the child.

"Yes," very slowly mouthing the French words; "I—can't —speak —French—but—I—am—French."

The small face disappears in the big beard.

Somehow, I can't imagine the Marechal des Logis killing babies—even if his superior officer, now sketching the scene, were to order him!

. . . . . .

The great building must once have been a monastery. Twilight softened its gaunt wings, in an angle of which were collected fifty prisoners, picked up among the hills behind the mists.

They stood in some sort of military formation preparatory to being marched off. They were dressed in khaki, the colour of gassed grass, that might have belonged to any army. Two wore spectacles, and I counted eight faces of the fifty which were asymmetrical—out of drawing on one side.

"Some of their later drafts give us that type," said the Interpreter. One of them had been wounded in the head and roughly bandaged. The others seemed all sound. Most of them looked at nothing, but several were vividly alive with terror that cannot keep the eyelids still, and a few wavered on the grey edge of collapse.

They were the breed which, at the word of command, had stolen out to drown women and children; had raped women in the streets at the word of command; and, always at the word of command, had sprayed petrol, or squirted flame; or defiled the property and persons of their captives. They stood there outside all humanity. Yet they were made in the likeness of humanity. One realized it with a shock when the bandaged creature began to shiver, and they shuffled off in response to the orders of civilized men.

V
Life in Trenches on the Mountain Side

Very early in the morning I met Alan Breck, with a half–healed bullet–scrape across the bridge of his nose, and an Alpine cap over one ear. His people a few hundred years ago had been Scotch. He bore a Scotch name, and still recognized the head of his clan, but his French occasionally ran into German words, for he was an Alsatian on one side.

"This," he explained, "is the very best country in the world to fight in. It's picturesque and full of cover. I'm a gunner. I've been here for months. It's lovely."

It might have been the hills under Mussoorie, and what our cars expected to do in it I could not understand. But the demon–driver who had been a road–racer took the 70 h.p. Mercedes and threaded the narrow valleys, as well as occasional half–Swiss villages full of Alpine troops, at a restrained thirty miles an hour. He shot up a new–made road, more like Mussoorie than ever, and did not fall down the hillside even once. An ammunition–mule of a mountain–battery met him at a tight corner, and began to climb a tree.

"See! There isn't another place in France where that could happen," said Alan. "I tell you, this is a magnificent country."

The mule was hauled down by his tail before he had reached the lower branches, and went on through the woods, his ammunition–boxes jinking on his back, for all the world as though he were rejoining his battery at Jutogh. One expected to meet the little Hill people bent under their loads under the forest gloom. The light, the colour, the smell of wood smoke, pine–needles, wet earth, and warm mule were all Himalayan. Only the Mercedes was violently and loudly a stranger.

"Halt!" said Alan at last, when she had done everything except imitate the mule.

"The road continues," said the demon–driver seductively.

"Yes, but they will hear you if you go on. Stop and wait. We've a mountain battery to look at."

They were not at work for the moment, and the Commandant, a grim and forceful man, showed me some details of their construction. When we left them in their bower—it looked like a Hill priest's wayside shrine—we heard them singing through the steep–descending pines. They, too, like the 75's, seem to have no pet name in the service.

It was a poisonously blind country. The woods blocked all sense

of direction above and around. The ground was at any angle you please, and all sounds were split up and muddled by the tree–trunks, which acted as silencers. High above us the respectable, all–concealing forest had turned into sparse, ghastly blue sticks of timber—an assembly of leper–trees round a bald mountain top. "That's where we're going," said Alan. "Isn't it an adorable country?"

TRENCHES

A machine–gun loosed a few shots in the fumbling style of her kind when they feel for an opening. A couple of rifle shots answered. They might have been half a mile away or a hundred yards below. An adorable country! We climbed up till we found once again a complete tea–garden of little sunk houses, almost invisible in the brown–pink recesses of the thick forest. Here the trenches began, and with them for the next few hours life in two dimensions—length and breadth. You could have eaten your dinner almost anywhere off the swept dry ground, for the steep slopes favoured draining, there was no lack of timber, and there was unlimited labour. It had made neat double–length dug–outs where the wounded could be laid in during their passage down the mountain side; well–tended occasional latrines properly limed; dug–outs for sleeping and eating; overhead protections and tool–sheds where needed, and, as one came nearer the working face, very clever cellars against trench–sweepers. Men passed on their business; a squad with a captured machine–gun which they tested in a sheltered dip; armourers at their benches busy with sick rifles; fatigue–parties for straw, rations, and ammunition; long processions of single blue figures turned sideways between the brown sunless walls. One understood after a while the nightmare that lays hold of trench–stale men, when the dreamer wanders for ever in those blind mazes till, after centuries of agonizing flight, he finds himself stumbling out again into the white blaze and horror of the mined front —he who thought he had almost reached home!

IN THE FRONT LINE

There were no trees above us now. Their trunks lay along the edge of the trench, built in with stones, where necessary, or sometimes overhanging it in ragged splinters or bushy tops. Bits of cloth, not French, showed, too, in the uneven lines of debris at the trench lip, and some thoughtful soul had marked an unexploded Boche trench–sweeper as "not to be touched." It was a young lawyer from Paris who pointed that out to me.

We met the Colonel at the head of an indescribable pit of ruin, full of sunshine, whose steps ran down a very steep hillside under the lee of an almost vertically plunging parapet. To the left of that parapet the whole hillside was one gruel of smashed trees, split stones, and powdered soil. It might have been a rag–picker's dump–heap on a

colossal scale.

Alan looked at it critically. I think he had helped to make it not long before.

"We're on the top of the hill now, and the Boches are below us," said he. "We gave them a very fair sickener lately."

"This," said the Colonel, "is the front line."

There were overhead guards against hand–bombs which disposed me to believe him, but what convinced me most was a corporal urging us in whispers not to talk so loud. The men were at dinner, and a good smell of food filled the trench. This was the first smell I had encountered in my long travels uphill—a mixed, entirely wholesome flavour of stew, leather, earth, and rifle–oil.

FRONT LINE PROFESSIONALS

A proportion of men were standing to arms while others ate; but dinner–time is slack time, even among animals, and it was close on noon.

"The Boches got *their* soup a few days ago," some one whispered. I thought of the pulverized hillside, and hoped it had been hot enough.

We edged along the still trench, where the soldiers stared, with justified contempt, I thought, upon the civilian who scuttled through their life for a few emotional minutes in order to make words out of their blood. Somehow it reminded me of coming in late to a play and incommoding a long line of packed stalls. The whispered dialogue was much the same: "Pardon!" "I beg your pardon, monsieur." "To the right, monsieur." "If monsieur will lower his head." "One sees best from here, monsieur," and so on. It was their day and night–long business, carried through without display or heat, or doubt or indecision. Those who worked, worked; those off duty, not five feet behind them in the dug–outs, were deep in their papers, or their meals or their letters; while death stood ready at every minute to drop down into the narrow cut from out of the narrow strip of unconcerned sky. And for the better part of a week one had skirted hundreds of miles of such a frieze!

The loopholes not in use were plugged rather like old–fashioned hives. Said the Colonel, removing a plug: "Here are the Boches. Look, and you'll see their sandbags." Through the jumble of riven trees and stones one saw what might have been a bit of green sacking. "They're about seven metres distant just here," the Colonel went on. That was true, too. We entered a little fortalice with a cannon in it, in an embrasure which at that moment struck me as unnecessarily vast, even though it was partly closed by a frail packing–case lid. The Colonel sat him down in front of it, and explained the theory of this sort of redoubt. "By the way," he said to the gunner at last, "can't you find something better than *that?"* He twitched the lid aside. "I think it's

too light. Get a log of wood or something."

HANDY TRENCH–SWEEPERS

I loved that Colonel! He knew his men and he knew the Boches — had them marked down like birds. When he said they were beside dead trees or behind boulders, sure enough there they were! But, as I have said, the dinner–hour is always slack, and even when we came to a place where a section of trench had been bashed open by trench–sweepers, and it was recommended to duck and hurry, nothing much happened. The uncanny thing was the absence of movement in the Boche trenches. Sometimes one imagined that one smelt strange tobacco, or heard a rifle–bolt working after a shot. Otherwise they were as still as pig at noonday.

We held on through the maze, past trench–sweepers of a handy light pattern, with their screw–tailed charge all ready; and a grave or so; and when I came on men who merely stood within easy reach of their rifles, I knew I was in the second line. When they lay frankly at ease in their dug–outs, I knew it was the third. A shot–gun would have sprinkled all three.

"No flat plains," said Alan. "No hunting for gun positions —the hills are full of them—and the trenches close together and commanding each other. You see what a beautiful country it is."

The Colonel confirmed this, but from another point of view. War was his business, as the still woods could testify—but his hobby was his trenches. He had tapped the mountain streams and dug out a laundry where a man could wash his shirt and go up and be killed in it, all in a morning; had drained the trenches till a muddy stretch in them was an offence; and at the bottom of the hill (it looked like a hydropathic establishment on the stage) he had created baths where half a battalion at a time could wash. He never told me how all that country had been fought over as fiercely as Ypres in the West; nor what blood had gone down the valleys before his trenches pushed over the scalped mountain top. No. He sketched out new endeavours in earth and stones and trees for the comfort of his men on that populous mountain.

And there came a priest, who was a sub–lieutenant, out of a wood of snuff–brown shadows and half–veiled trunks. Would it please me to look at a chapel? It was all open to the hillside, most tenderly and devoutly done in rustic work with reedings of peeled branches and panels of moss and thatch—St. Hubert's own shrine. I saw the hunters who passed before it, going to the chase on the far side of the mountain where their game lay.

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A BOMBARDED TOWN

Alan carried me off to tea the same evening in a town where he seemed to know everybody. He had spent the afternoon on another mountain top, inspecting gun positions; whereby he had been shelled a little—*marmite* is the slang for it. There had been no serious *marmitage,* and he had spotted a Boche position which was *marmitable.*

"And we may get shelled now," he added, hopefully. "They shell this town whenever they think of it. Perhaps they'll shell us at tea."

It was a quaintly beautiful little place, with its mixture of French and German ideas; its old bridge and gentle–minded river, between the cultivated hills. The sand–bagged cellar doors, the ruined houses, and the holes in the pavement looked as unreal as the violences of a cinema against that soft and simple setting. The people were abroad in the streets, and the little children were playing. A big shell gives notice enough for one to get to shelter, if the shelter is near enough. That appears to be as much as any one expects in the world where one is shelled, and that world has settled down to it. People's lips are a little firmer, the modelling of the brows is a little more pronounced, and, maybe, there is a change in the expression of the eyes; but nothing that a casual afternoon caller need particularly notice.

CASES FOR HOSPITAL

The house where we took tea was the "big house" of the place, old and massive, a treasure house of ancient furniture. It had everything that the moderate heart of man could desire —gardens, garages, outbuildings, and the air of peace that goes with beauty in age. It stood over a high cellarage, and opposite the cellar door was a brand–new blindage of earth packed between timbers. The cellar was a hospital, with its beds and stores, and under the electric light the orderly waited ready for the cases to be carried down out of the streets.

"Yes, they are all civil cases," said he.

They come without much warning—a woman gashed by falling timber; a child with its temple crushed by a flying stone; an urgent amputation case, and so on. One never knows. Bombardment, the Boche text–books say, "is designed to terrify the civil population so that they may put pressure on their politicians to conclude peace." In real life, men are very rarely soothed by the sight of their women being tortured.

We took tea in the hall upstairs, with a propriety and an interchange of compliments that suited the little occasion. There was no attempt to disguise the existence of a bombardment, but it was not allowed to overweigh talk of lighter matters. I know one guest who sat through it as near as might be inarticulate with wonder. But he was English, and when Alan asked him whether he had enjoyed himself,

he said: "Oh, yes. Thank you very much."

"Nice people, aren't they?" Alan went on.

"Oh, very nice. And—and such good tea."

He managed to convey a few of his sentiments to Alan after dinner.

"But what else could the people have done?" said he. "They are French."

VI
The Common Task of a Great People

"This is the end of the line," said the Staff Officer, kindest and most patient of chaperons. It buttressed itself on a fortress among hills. Beyond that, the silence was more awful than the mixed noise of business to the westward. In mileage on the map the line must be between four and five hundred miles; in actual trench–work many times that distance. It is too much to see at full length; the mind does not readily break away from the obsession of its entirety or the grip of its detail. One visualizes the thing afterwards as a white–hot gash, worming all across France between intolerable sounds and lights, under ceaseless blasts of whirled dirt. Nor is it any relief to lose oneself among wildernesses of piling, stoning, timbering, concreting, and wire–work, or incalculable quantities of soil thrown up raw to the light and cloaked by the changing seasons—as the unburied dead are cloaked.

Yet there are no words to give the essential simplicity of it. It is the rampart put up by Man against the Beast, precisely as in the Stone Age. If it goes, all that keeps us from the Beast goes with it. One sees this at the front as clearly as one sees the French villages behind the German lines. Sometimes people steal away from them and bring word of what they endure.

Where the rifle and the bayonet serve, men use those tools along the front. Where the knife gives better results, they go in behind the hand–grenades with the naked twelve–inch knife. Each race is supposed to fight in its own way, but this war has passed beyond all the known ways. They say that the Belgians in the north settle accounts with a certain dry passion which has varied very little since their agony began. Some sections of the English line have produced a soft–voiced, rather reserved type, which does its work with its mouth shut. The French carry an edge to their fighting, a precision, and a dreadful knowledge coupled with an insensibility to shock, unlike anything one has imagined of mankind. To be sure, there has never been like provocation, for never since the Aesir went about to bind the Fenris Wolf has all the world united to bind the Beast.

The last I saw of the front was Alan Breck speeding back to his gun–positions among the mountains; and I wondered what delight of what household the lad must have been in the old days.

SUPPORTS AND RESERVES

Then we had to work our way, department by department, against the tides of men behind the line—supports and their supports,

reserves and reserves of reserves, as well as the masses in training. They flooded towns and villages, and when we tried short–cuts we found them in every by–lane. Have you seen mounted men reading their home letters with the reins thrown on the horses' necks, moving in absorbed silence through a street which almost said "Hush!" to its dogs; or met, in a forest, a procession of perfectly new big guns, apparently taking themselves from the foundry to the front?

In spite of their love of drama, there is not much "window–dressing" in the French character. The Boche, who is the priest of the Higher Counter–jumpery, would have had half the neutral Press out in cars to advertise these vast spectacles of men and material. But the same instinct as makes their rich farmers keep to their smocks makes the French keep quiet.

"This is our affair," they argue. "Everybody concerned is taking part in it. Like the review you saw the other day, there are no spectators."

"But it might be of advantage if the world knew."

Mine was a foolish remark. There is only one world to–day, the world of the Allies. Each of them knows what the others are doing and —the rest doesn't matter. This is a curious but delightful fact to realize at first hand. And think what it will be later, when we shall all circulate among each other and open our hearts and talk it over in a brotherhood more intimate than the ties of blood!

I lay that night at a little French town, and was kept awake by a man, somewhere in the hot, still darkness, howling aloud from the pain of his wounds. I was glad that he was alone, for when one man gives way the others sometimes follow. Yet the single note of misery was worse than the baying and gulping of a whole ward. I wished that a delegation of strikers could have heard it.

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That a civilian should be in the war zone at all is a fair guarantee of his good faith. It is when he is outside the zone unchaperoned that questions begin, and the permits are looked into. If these are irregular —but one doesn't care to contemplate it. If regular, there are still a few counter–checks. As the sergeant at the railway station said when he helped us out of an impasse: "You will realize that it is the most undesirable persons whose papers are of the most regular. It is their business you see. The Commissary of Police is at the Hotel de Ville, if you will come along for the little formality. Myself, I used to keep a shop in Paris. My God, these provincial towns are desolating!"

PARIS—AND NO FOREIGNERS

He would have loved his Paris as we found it. Life was renewing itself in the streets, whose drawing and proportion one could never notice before. People's eyes, and the women's especially, seemed to be set to a longer range, a more comprehensive gaze. One would have said they came from the sea or the mountains, where things are few and simple, rather than from houses. Best of all, there were no foreigners—the beloved city for the first time was French throughout from end to end. It felt like coming back to an old friend's house for a quiet talk after he had got rid of a houseful of visitors. The functionaries and police had dropped their masks of official politeness, and were just friendly. At the hotels, so like school two days before the term begins, the impersonal valet, the chambermaid of the set two–franc smile, and the unbending head–waiter had given place to one's own brothers and sisters, full of one's own anxieties. "My son is an aviator, monsieur. I could have claimed Italian nationality for him at the beginning, but he would not have it." . . . "Both my brothers, monsieur, are at the war. One is dead already. And my fiance, I have not heard from him since March. He is cook in a battalion." . . . "Here is the wine–list, monsieur. Yes, both my sons and a nephew, and—I have no news of them, not a word of news. My God, we all suffer these days." And so, too, among the shops—the mere statement of the loss or the grief at the heart, but never a word of doubt, never a whimper of despair.

"Now why," asked a shopkeeper, "does not our Government, or your Government, or both our Governments, send some of the British Army to Paris? I assure you we should make them welcome."

"Perhaps," I began, "you might make them too welcome."

He laughed. "We should make them as welcome as our own army. They would enjoy themselves." I had a vision of British officers, each with ninety days' pay to his credit, and a damsel or two at home, shopping consumedly.

"And also," said the shopkeeper, "the moral effect on Paris to see more of your troops would be very good."

But I saw a quite English Provost–Marshal losing himself in chase of defaulters of the New Army who knew their Paris! Still, there is something to be said for the idea—to the extent of a virtuous brigade or so. At present, the English officer in Paris is a scarce bird, and he explains at once why he is and what he is doing there. He must have good reasons. I suggested teeth to an acquaintance. "No good," he grumbled. "They've thought of that, too. Behind our lines is simply crawling with dentists now!"

A PEOPLE TRANSFIGURED

If one asked after the people that gave dinners and dances last year, where every one talked so brilliantly of such vital things, one got

in return the addresses of hospitals. Those pleasant hostesses and maidens seemed to be in charge of departments or on duty in wards, or kitchens, or sculleries. Some of the hospitals were in Paris. (Their staffs might have one hour a day in which to see visitors.) Others were up the line, and liable to be shelled or bombed.

I recalled one Frenchwoman in particular, because she had once explained to me the necessities of civilized life. These included a masseuse, a manicurist, and a maid to look after the lapdogs. She is employed now, and has been for months past, on the disinfection and repair of soldiers' clothes. There was no need to ask after the men one had known. Still, there was no sense of desolation. They had gone on; the others were getting ready.

All France works outward to the Front—precisely as an endless chain of fire–buckets works toward the conflagration. Leave the fire behind you and go back till you reach the source of supplies. You will find no break, no pause, no apparent haste, but never any slackening. Everybody has his or her bucket, little or big, and nobody disputes how they should be used. It is a people possessed of the precedent and tradition of war for existence, accustomed to hard living and hard labour, sanely economical by temperament, logical by training, and illumined and transfigured by their resolve and endurance.

You know, when supreme trial overtakes an acquaintance whom till then we conceived we knew, how the man's nature sometimes changes past knowledge or belief. He who was altogether such an one as ourselves goes forward simply, even lightly, to heights we thought unattainable. Though he is the very same comrade that lived our small life with us, yet in all things he has become great. So it is with France to–day. She has discovered the measure of her soul.

THE NEW WAR

One sees this not alone in the—it is more than contempt of death —in the godlike preoccupation of her people under arms which makes them put death out of the account, but in the equal passion and fervour with which her people throughout give themselves to the smallest as well as the greatest tasks that may in any way serve their sword. I might tell you something that I saw of the cleaning out of certain latrines; of the education and antecedents of the cleaners; what they said in the matter and how perfectly the work was done. There was a little Rabelais in it, naturally, but the rest was pure devotion, rejoicing to be of use.

Similarly with stables, barricades, and barbed–wire work, the clearing and piling away of wrecked house–rubbish, the serving of meals till the service rocks on its poor tired feet, but keeps its temper; and all the unlovely, monotonous details that go with war.

The women, as I have tried to show, work stride for stride with

the men, with hearts as resolute and a spirit that has little mercy for short–comings. A woman takes her place wherever she can relieve a man—in the shop, at the posts, on the tramways, the hotels, and a thousand other businesses. She is inured to field–work, and half the harvest of France this year lies in her lap. One feels at every turn how her men trust her. She knows, for she shares everything with her world, what has befallen her sisters who are now in German hands, and her soul is the undying flame behind the men's steel. Neither men nor women have any illusion as to miracles presently to be performed which shall "sweep out" or "drive back" the Boche. Since the Army is the Nation, they know much, though they are officially told little. They all recognize that the old–fashioned "victory" of the past is almost as obsolete as a rifle in a front–line trench. They all accept the new war, which means grinding down and wearing out the enemy by every means and plan and device that can be compassed. It is slow and expensive, but as deadly sure as the logic that leads them to make it their one work, their sole thought, their single preoccupation.

A NATION'S CONFIDENCE

The same logic saves them a vast amount of energy. They knew Germany in '70, when the world would not believe in their knowledge; they knew the German mind before the war; they know what she has done (they have photographs) during this war. They do not fall into spasms of horror and indignation over atrocities "that cannot be mentioned," as the English papers say. They mention them in full and book them to the account. They do not discuss, nor consider, nor waste an emotion over anything that Germany says or boasts or argues or implies or intrigues after. They have the heart's ease that comes from all being at work for their country; the knowledge that the burden of work is equally distributed among all; the certainty that the women are working side by side with the men; the assurance that when one man's task is at the moment ended, another takes his place.

Out of these things is born their power of recuperation in their leisure; their reasoned calm while at work; and their superb confidence in their arms. Even if France of to–day stood alone against the world's enemy, it would be almost inconceivable to imagine her defeat now; wholly so to imagine any surrender. The war will go on till the enemy is finished. The French do not know when that hour will come; they seldom speak of it; they do not amuse themselves with dreams of triumphs or terms. Their business is war, and they do their business.

notes

Примечания

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